

The Key to Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:3–14; Gal. 4:7; Eph. 2:11–22; 4:1–6, 11; Matt. 20:25–28; Eph. 5:15–6:9.*

Memory Text: “Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (*Ephesians 1:9, 10, NKJV*).

Ephesus was a major center of commerce and influence in Asia Minor. The church there, in Ephesus, was made up of Jews, Gentiles, and people in all social walks of life. Such a diverse membership might have been as prone to conflicts as the world in which they lived; that is, if it weren't for Christ and the unity they had in Him as members of the body of Christ. Thus, Paul's concern for unity among Christ's followers is the central theme of his Epistle to the Ephesians.

Paul's concept of unity has two dimensions: unity in the church, where Jews and Gentiles are brought together in one body—Christ; and unity in the universe, in which all things in heaven and earth find their ultimate oneness in Christ.

The source of this unity is Christ. Paul's expression “in Christ” or “with Christ” is used numerous times in this epistle in order to show what God has accomplished for us and for the universe through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's ultimate purpose in the plan of salvation is to reunify all things through Christ. This unity will be made fully manifest only at the end of the age.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 27.

Blessings in Christ

Read Ephesians 1:3–14. What, according to Paul here, have we been given in Christ?

The followers of Jesus have much to praise God for. In Christ, God has chosen to adopt us as sons and daughters and to represent Him to the world. Paul uses many images to describe our new relationship to God in Christ. Of these images, the image of adoption addresses this lesson's theme of oneness. In Christ, we have been adopted, and we belong to the family of God. This family image also is a reference to God's covenant with the children of Israel. In the context of Paul's epistle, Gentiles who accept Jesus as the Messiah also are children of God, heirs of the promises made to Israel (*Rom. 8:17, Gal. 4:7*). The benefit of this relationship with Christ, to be in Christ, is fundamental to all Christian unity. This passage also tells us that it has been God's desire all along to reunite all humanity in Christ. And, in God's family, we are all children of God, equally loved and cherished.

Some get confused when, in this passage, we read about predestination (*Eph. 1:5, 11*). The promise that God has chosen us to be saved seems to imply also that God has chosen some to be lost. But that's not the biblical teaching. Rather, God prepared the plan of salvation before the foundation of the world in order that everyone might be saved. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (*John 3:16, NKJV; see also 1 Tim. 2:6, 2 Pet. 3:9*). God knows beforehand who will accept His offer of salvation, but that is not the same as predetermining one's decision. Salvation is offered to all humanity because of what Christ has done for us. The question is: *How do we respond to this offer?* God does not use coercion to save anyone.

"In the council of heaven, provision was made that men, though transgressors, should not perish in their disobedience, but, through faith in Christ as their substitute and surety, might become the elect of God, predestinated unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself according to the good pleasure of His will. God wills that all men should be saved; for ample provision has been made, in giving His only-begotten Son to pay man's ransom. Those who perish will perish because they refuse to be adopted as children of God through Christ Jesus."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1114.

Breaking Down the Wall

Some of the deepest divisions among people are caused by differences of race, ethnicity, and religion. In many societies, identity cards indicate the ethnicity or religion one belongs to, and these distinctions often are connected with privileges or restrictions that people have to live with on a daily basis. When wars or conflicts arise, these markers of identity and differences often become catalysts for repression and violence.

In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul indicates a better way for the Christian community. How does our unity in Christ affect our differences? What was broken down by Jesus’ death on the cross?

Paul invites the Ephesians to remember what their lives were like before they received the grace of God in Christ. Ethnic, cultural, and religious differences created animosity and conflicts between people groups. But the good news is that, in Christ, we are all one people with a common Savior and Lord. We all belong to the people of God. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*Eph. 2:13, NKJV*).

The ancient temple in Jerusalem had a wall of separation to distinguish the sections of the temple accessible only to ethnic Jews. This wall had an inscription that forbade foreigners to go any further, under pain of death. It is this regulation that Paul was accused of transgressing when he entered the temple after his missionary journeys. When Paul was arrested, he was charged with bringing into the Jewish section of the temple an Ephesian named Trophimus (*Acts 21:29*). In this epistle Paul argues that Christ “is our peace, who has made both [ethnic groups] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation” (*Eph. 2:14, NKJV*).

In Christ, believers are descendants of Abraham and receive the circumcision of the heart. The physical circumcision that God gave to Abraham pointed to the spiritual circumcision that believers would receive in Christ (*see Deut. 10:16*). “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (*Col. 2:11, NKJV*).

Read again Ephesians 2:11–22. In what ways do we see in our own church the reality of what Paul has written here? What challenges remain?

Unity in One Body

Paul is practical in his inspired words to the Ephesians. The unity that exists between Jews and Gentiles, between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, is not a myth or simply a theoretical construct; it is a reality that demands us “to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (*Eph. 4:1, NKJV*).

According to Ephesians 4:1–3, in what way are Christians to walk worthy of their calling in Christ?

The practical outcome of these virtues and graces in the Christian’s life helps “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:3, NKJV*). All these attributes are rooted in love (*1 Cor. 13:1–7*). The active practice of love preserves relationships among brothers and sisters and promotes peace and unity in the Christian community and beyond. Unity in the church manifests God’s love in unique ways that others can witness. The church is called to be such a witness, especially in a time of strife, divisions, and wars.

Read Ephesians 4:4–6. What is one crucial theme in these three verses?

In the first verses of this chapter, Paul expresses his deep interest in the unity of the church. He begins with an exhortation to unity (*Eph. 4:1–3*) and follows with a list of the seven elements that unite believers (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Unity is simultaneously something that believers already possess (*Eph. 4:4–6*), something that must be constantly worked on and maintained (*Eph. 4:1–3*), and something that is the future goal toward which we strive (*Eph. 4:13*).

“The apostle exhorts his brethren to manifest in their lives the power of the truth which he had presented to them. By meekness and gentleness, forbearance and love, they were to exemplify the character of Christ and the blessings of His salvation. There is but one body, and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith. As members of the body of Christ all believers are animated by the same spirit and the same hope. Divisions in the church dishonor the religion of Christ before the world and give occasion to the enemies of truth to justify their course. Paul’s instructions were not written alone for the church in his day. God designed that they should be sent down to us. What are we doing to preserve unity in the bonds of peace?”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 239.

What choices can you make right now in order to be sure that you are walking “worthy of the calling with which you were called”?

Church Leaders and Unity

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*Eph. 4:7, NKJV*). While salvation is a gift given to all people who will receive it, some spiritual gifts are given to certain people for a special purpose.

Read Ephesians 4:11. What gifts of leadership does God give to the church?

According to Ephesians 4:12, what is God’s purpose in giving special gifts of leadership to the church? How do these gifts relate to each other?

All Christians are in a sense ministers and servants of God and the gospel. Christ’s commission in Matthew 28:19, 20 is given to all Christians to go, to make disciples of all nations, to baptize, and to teach. The work of ministry is not given only to a privileged few, such as pastors and/or evangelists, but to all who bear the name of Christ. No one can claim exemption from the work of spreading the gospel, and no church leader can claim to have an exclusive ministry. The spiritual gifts of leadership are specifically to edify the church. Church leaders are needed to foster, promote, and encourage unity.

Paul’s list of gifts of leadership tells us that these roles also are for equipping God’s people to reach the lost. It is the responsibility of some specially called people within the church to help others fulfill their ministry and service for Christ, and to edify the body of Christ, “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*). The example of Jesus’ style of leadership must guide how we do ministry. Jesus came to serve others and not to be served (*Matt. 20:25–28*); we must go and do likewise.

There is a strong tendency among humans to be independent and not accountable to anyone. Western society, in particular, is plagued by this inclination. Paul reminds us, however, that no Christian is alone in this world and that we form a community of faith with spiritual leaders to help encourage one another in our common journey. We are, all together, part of the body of Christ.

What spiritual gifts do you have, and how are you using them for the unity of your local church?

Human Relationships in Christ

Christianity is a religion of relationships: relationship with God and with one another. It makes no sense to claim to have a deep relationship with God without that relationship having an impact on the relationships one has with other people. Christianity cannot be lived in a vacuum. The principles of unity Paul discusses in his Epistle to the Ephesians also are applicable to how we relate to others.

Read Ephesians 5:15–21. What is Paul saying to us in verse 21? What is the relationship between submission and unity?

Paul’s exhortation to be submitted to one another is connected with the phrase being “filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:18. One of the expressions of the infilling of the Spirit is submission to one another. This refers to the proper attitude of humility and thoughtfulness that we should have toward people. Of course, this is not a natural attribute of most personalities, but is the result of the Spirit’s living in our hearts. It is a gift of the same Spirit, who is the bond of unity in Christ. Viewed from this perspective, submission is an inner quality that expresses our reverence for Christ and His sacrifice for us.

Read Ephesians 5:22–6:9. What impact on our human relationships does this quality of mutual submission have in the home and workplace of a believer in Christ?

To some extent, unity in the church depends upon unity in the home. Paul emphasized that the unity, love, and respect that should exist between husband and wife should exemplify the love of Christ toward the church, a self-sacrificing love. Thus, Christlike respect in the home as well as in the church is required of husbands and wives and church members. This Christlike attribute also is to be exemplified in relationships between children and parents and between employees and employers (bondservants and masters). The kind of harmony and peacefulness that should pervade our homes should pervade our church life, as well.

What principles can you take from the verses for today that can help you better understand how you should act (depending upon your situation) toward a member of your family or a coworker?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Spirit of Unity,” pp. 179–188, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9.

“Christ recognized no distinction of nationality or rank or creed. The scribes and Pharisees desired to make a local and a national benefit of all the gifts of heaven and to exclude the rest of God’s family in the world. But Christ came to break down every wall of partition. He came to show that His gift of mercy and love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth.

“The life of Christ established a religion in which there is no caste, a religion by which Jew and Gentile, free and bond, are linked in a common brotherhood, equal before God. No question of policy influenced His movements. He made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. That which appealed to His heart was a soul thirsting for the waters of life.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 190, 191.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Reflect on this statement: “In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the plan of God is so plainly and simply revealed that all His children may lay hold upon the truth. Here the means which He has appointed to keep unity in His church, that its members may reveal to the world a healthy religious experience, is plainly declared.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1117. What do you see in Ephesians 4 that points to the unity of the church? What can we do to help ensure that unity?
- 2 So central to the question of unity is the need for humility and submission. Without these traits, how could any unity exist in the church? If we are proud, sure of our views and positions, and unwilling to listen to others, we have no chance of unity. How can we learn this humility and submission?
- 3 How can we have unity even when we don’t always agree on everything?

Summary: In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul gives many counsels regarding what it means for Christians to be “in Christ.” Salvation in Jesus transforms our lives in practical ways. All our human relationships, including relations between brothers and sisters in the church, are transformed by the power of Christ in our lives. And this transformation is crucial in order for us to have unity.

Female Bomber Baptized

By PHILIP BAPTISTE

Amina is serving a five-year prison sentence in East-Central Africa after being arrested as she headed to India to blow up a large facility.

But persistent visits by a Seventh-day Adventist pastor resulted in her discarding her fundamentalist understanding of Islam and being baptized into the Adventist Church.

“I just praise God for the Adventist pastor who consistently prayed for me and visited me in my time of great need,” Amina said.

For her safety, Adventist Mission is not disclosing Amina’s full name or her location.

Amina was in solitary confinement, in an isolated cell, because of the nature of her crime when the pastor first came to visit. She had plotted the attack after being taught by fundamental Muslim leaders that she would attain righteousness and live in paradise if she eliminated evil.

Initially, Amina rebuffed the pastor, whose counseling visits were arranged by the prison warden. But when the pastor kept returning, she relented because the counseling sessions would be held outside her cell and she missed the sunshine.

Amina refused the pastor’s first request to pray for her. She told the pastor that he should pray for himself instead. The pastor prayed for her anyway, and he kept on praying.

After a few counseling sessions together, the pastor had to take care of business elsewhere for a few weeks. Amina began to miss the visits. When the pastor did not return as soon as she expected, she started reading a Bible that he had left in her cell.

A few months later, the Adventist church organized a camp meeting at the prison, and Amina was invited to attend. Amina agreed to go for the sake of socializing with the other inmates. To her surprise, when the pastor made an altar call, she went up to surrender her life to Jesus. Not long after, she was baptized.

Amina said she does not understand how, during the counseling sessions, she lost interest in her former faith. She believes that God used her imprisonment to reveal His truth to her, and now she is anxious to reach her friends.

“When I get out of prison, I will spend all that I have to reach them,” she said.



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